Early Fairbury Settlers Challenged by Many Health Issues

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Since we live in the 21st century, it is hard for us to appreciate the problems the first Fairbury area settlers faced with disease and consequently shortened life-spans.

One good example of this was the John Edward Bodley Sr. family. They came from Indiana to Fairbury in about 1852. This family had eight children and was plagued by premature deaths.

Edward died at 4 years old, Della at 10, Sara at 22, Mary at 25, Margaret at 28, John Jr. at 50, Thomas at 53, and William at 65. This family lost three young girls within 18 months of each other. Only one child out of eight out-lived the parents. Unfortunately, we don't know the exact causes of the deaths in the Bodley family. Under Illinois law, no death certificates were required until after 1916. Since these deaths were in the 1870s, no death certificates exist to explain the reasons for all these deaths.

Lucille Goodrich was the Livingston County School Superintendent for many years. She wrote a book about Livingston county titled ***A Livingston County Scrapbook by Lucile Goodrich (1855-1975).*** Her book is mostly about school history, but she devoted one chapter to public health.

She noted that early settlers brought with them malaria, milk fever, and other diseases to add to those already found here. Malaria was called the ague, shakes, the chills, bilious fever, intermittent or remittent typhoid, and typhus, autumnal fever, etc.

Conditions were ideal for the development of malaria. Because the swampy land was not yet tiled to drain it, mosquitoes were plentiful. Quinine, used to cure the ague, caused the ears to roar and gave one a feeling of great lassitude.

If a woman became proficient in caring for the sick, she was in high demand. She used home remedies usually made from herbs or applied poultices like a mustard plaster. Physicians were scarce and unschooled. Their chief "stock in trade" consisted of quinine, calomel, castor oil, laudanum and camphor dissolved in alcohol.

Taking baths and changing clothes were not always included in the day's schedule. Chewing tobacco and the subsequent "spitting" was common among adults. Alcoholic beverages were freely used both in sickness and in health.

Windows were not protected by any kind of screening and flies were abundant. Rats and roaches added their share. Some of the so-called "filth" diseases were typhoid, diphtheria, cholera, yellow fever and smallpox.

In 1849 an epidemic of cholera swept through the county. Other illnesses such as pneumonia, influenza, consumption (tuberculosis), milk sickness, rheumatism, tetanus, food poisoning, and snakebite also flourished.

The birth rate was high but so was the death rate. A forty-year-old man or woman was considered old. It is estimated that half the children born in Illinois in pioneer days died before reaching five years of age, usually from digestive disorders.

Proper food was a problem. The Pioneers' primary sources of food came from hunting deer, wild turkey, pigeons, opossums, ducks, geese, and quail. Fishing also helped.

James P. Morgan, Long Point, said that when he came to this section of the country in 1854, wild game of all kinds was plentiful. He reported that he had seen as many as 100 deer in a herd.

The pioneers usually set aside Saturday as their weekly hunting day. As more settlers came, the game became scarce. Obtaining salt was another problem. Honey was important in the life of the pioneer. It is believed the bee was not native to Illinois but was brought here by the settlers. There were some vegetables grown; corn, pumpkins, cucumbers, cabbage, and tomatoes.

The cow was indispensable even though the milk sometimes caused sickness. Later, an orchard was to be a necessary adjunct to every farm. Storage, too, was a problem. Food was cooled in a bucket hung in the well or in the sod-storm cellar or fruit house.

The pioneers had some weird remedies. Long ago it was not unusual for a child to come to school with a homemade bag of asafetida tied on a string around his neck. This was for warding off disease, but the awful odor was enough to keep people at a distance.

Sulfur and molasses were given to children in the spring to purify their blood. Sassafras tea was also considered useful. Colds were treated with goose grease spread on the throat and chest. If the cold persisted, the child was put to bed, covered heavily, and given hot tea (sassafras, snakeroot, dogwood, willow) to make him sweat.

Warts were removed by various odd methods, such as rubbing the wart with a dish rag and then burying the dish rag.

The so-called "childhood diseases" (measles, whooping cough, chicken pox, mumps) were common among early settlers. A child attending school would contract the disease and then pass it on to the entire room or school and to the children at home.

Scarlet fever was common, too, and smallpox was a dreaded disease. Sanitation was poor, and many unnecessary cases of typhoid fever developed. In 1849 cholera claimed many victims.

The doctors finally got some quarantine laws passed. When a child became sick, a big red sign giving the name of the disease was nailed on the front of his house by a member of the Board of Health. When he recovered, the house had to be fumigated before the sign could be taken down and the family could go outdoors again.

Fortunately, both sanitation methods and modern medicine were gradually improved. We can be very thankful we no longer have to face the many mysterious deaths that our forefathers had to endure.

A well dressed Fairbury physician of 1866.